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Techniques and Strategies of Teaching Reading Skills at Secondary Level: An Applicative Approach

Abstract: Traditional teaching practices and classroom do not promote many opportunities for the students to participate in the classroom or speak in the classroom rather they are like one-way traffic. The teacher plays an active role and teaches deductively throughout the course. It is regarded as the silent skills which can be learned automatically by the students. But the reality is reading is one of the important receptive skills of the language which enables students to learn or acquire other important skills of the language. It is like the soul of the language which fills the entire body with positive energy. So it is equally important to understand the importance of the reading skills in teaching and learning and develop the techniques and strategies of pedagogy which will make the learning process easier.

Strategies are often applied by the teachers and used by the learners to obtain the intended meaning of the text which they read. The paper intends to promote a practical application of classroom pedagogy to teach reading skills using activity-based teaching. It also emphasizes how different strategies of teaching reading and techniques can be used or utilized in teaching through different activities.

Key Words: Reading skills, Strategies, Techniques, Activities based teaching

Introduction

Teaching English in ESL/EFL context especially when it comes to teaching reading skills in the classroom brings a number of challenges for the teachers across the globe. This happens because practitioners and scholars partially take reading as an important skill which can be taught in the classroom. It is regarded as the silent skills which can be learned automatically by the students. But the reality is reading is one of the important receptive skills of the language which enables students to learn or acquire other important skills of the language. It is like the soul of the language which fills the entire body with positive energy. So it is equally important to understand the importance of the reading skills in teaching and learning and develop the techniques and strategies of pedagogy which will make the learning process easier.

Traditional teaching practices and classroom do not promote many opportunities for the students to participate in the classroom or speak in the classroom rather they are like one-way traffic. The teacher plays an active role and teaches deductively throughout the course. However, the demand for today's competitive world is to become active and expressive students at every forum. Students still do not feel comfortable when they are asked to deliver a speech or speak in front of the audience. This is because they are not trained enough to read and speak in the classroom. Additionally, teachers across the world in ESL/EFL classrooms do not use strategies or techniques to teach reading skills or develop the schema of the students.

Reading skills especially in EFL settings have different goals or we can say that a reader read a text with different intentions. Understanding a written text means getting the required meaning of that particular text as efficiently as possible. To retrieve the required meaning from the text one needs to apply different reading strategies according to their needs and wants. For example looking a newspaper for some specific information and looking a notice for required information or particular kind of information. Locating the relevant advertisement in the

newspaper contains in the article demonstrate that the purpose of reading in each situation has been successfully fulfilled. In the first case where the reader is looking for specific information applies the scanning strategies and in the second case the reader applies the skimming strategies to infer the gist of the text where more detailed comprehension of the text is needed.

Strategies are often applied by the teachers and used by the learners to obtain the intended meaning of the text which they read. Now the question here is what kind of text learners generally read and what are the necessary skills required for them to infer the meaning. For example what kind of text students read like newspapers, novels, short stories, other literary text and passages, essays, poems, articles, reports, summaries, textbooks and so forth. Now the next level of comprehension is why students read? The answer is generally students read to obtain the information from the text. The second is to seek pleasure from the text. The main ways of reading are as follows:

Skimming

The process of skimming comprises of quickly running through the text and get the gist of it and get a general idea of the text to understand what it is all about.

Scanning

Scanning as a strategy of reading is more specific as compared to the process of skimming because through this one can quickly going through a text to find a particular piece of information. It is used to get specific information from the text.

Extensive Reading

The extensive reading is mainly used to read longer texts, usually for one's own pleasure. This is a fluency activity, mainly involving the overall understanding of a text.

Intensive Reading

Intensive reading is used to read shorter texts, to extract specific information. This is more an accuracy activity involving reading for details of the text. These different ways of

reading are not mutually exclusive. For instance, one often skims through a passage to see what it is about before deciding whether it is worth scanning a particular paragraph for the information one is looking for. In real life, our reading purposes constantly vary and therefore, when devising exercises, we should vary the questions and the activities according to the type of text studied and the purpose in reading it. The idea of teaching reading skills varies according to the situation and level of students. Here one size fit for all cannot be applicable in the real classroom because the nature of the students is heterogeneous.

There are certain skills that should be implemented in the classroom when teaching reading skills. Judi Moreillon writes in the book titled *Collaborative Strategies for Teaching Reading Comprehension: Maximizing Your Impact*:

Brains seek out patterns and thinking involves making connections. Understanding the importance of background knowledge to comprehension is critical because we connect new information with prior knowledge before we integrate and organize the new information. Background knowledge is always behind reader backing up the comprehension. It is the sum of the prior experiences that bring to each new encounter with text. Each reader brings his own feelings, personality, and experiences to the text and that each reader is different each time he revisits a particular text. Background knowledge is what the reader brings to the reading event. Each reader's interpretation and each reading of the text are potentially unique. (19)

Firstly, it is very important for the students to recognize the script of the language in order to deduce the meaning of the text that they read and also have to make a prediction about the unfamiliar lexical items. Apart from this, they have to understand the conceptual meaning of the text and communicative function of the sentences and utterances. Secondly, one of the important aspects of reading is to link between the sentences to reach the exact meaning. For this, making the inter-sentential and intra-sentential relations is very important to understand

relations within the sentences. Cohesive devices are helpful in understanding the relations between the text and part of the text. Interpretation of discourse markers of text is an essential component because these markers support the reader to reach to the meaning.

Francoise Grellet writes in the book titled *Developing Reading Skills* "Reading is an active skill which needs attention and effort in ESL/EFL setting. As mentioned earlier, it constantly involves guessing, predicting, checking and asking oneself questions" (8). These are some of the steps that should be taken in order to infer the meaning of the text which is being read by the participants. This should, therefore, be taken into consideration when devising reading comprehension exercises. It is possible, for instance, to develop the students' powers of inference through systematic practice, or introduce questions which encourage students to anticipate the content of a text from its title and illustrations or the end of a story from the preceding paragraphs.

Similarly, one should introduce exercises in which there is no single straightforward answer. This type of exercise has too often required students to exercise only their powers of judgement and appreciation, but extending the range of these exercises to cover other reading skills will lead to greater comprehension of the text.

The second aspect of reading as an active skill is its communicative function. Exercises must be meaningful and correspond as often as possible to what one is expected to do with the text. Activities of reading comprehension exercises should be flexible and varied. Reading comprehension activities should be suited to the texts and to one's reasons for reading them.

The aim of the activities must be clearly defined and a clear distinction made between teaching and testing. Testing will obviously involve more accuracy type exercises whereas through teaching one should try to develop the skills of reading. Students should know that what they are doing in the classroom and why they are doing it.

The students must be taught how to approach and consider the text in order to become independent and efficient readers. It is also important to remember that meaning is not inherent in the text, that each reader brings his own meaning to what he reads based on what he expects from the text and his previous knowledge. This shows how difficult it is to test competence in reading comprehension and how great the temptation is to impose one's own interpretation on the learners. There is a number of techniques which are important to be taught while teaching reading skills. Few of them are discussed below.

Inference

Inferring means making use of syntactic, logical, and cultural clues to discover the meaning of unknown words from the text. If these are specific words, then word-formation and derivation will also play an important part. When dealing with a new text, it is better not to explain the difficult words to the learners beforehand. They would only get used to being given 'pre-processed' texts and would never make the effort to cope with a difficult passage on their own. On the contrary, students should be encouraged to make a guess at the meaning of the words they do not know rather than look them up in a dictionary. If they need to look at the dictionary to get a precise meaning - which is an important and necessary activity too - they should only do so after having tried to work out a solution on their own. This is why, from the very beginning, it is vital to develop the skill of inference.

The relationship within the Sentence

It is important to understand the relation between the sentences to get the meaning of the text. Inability to infer the meaning of unknown elements often causes discouragement and apprehension in students when they are faced with a new text. A similar problem arises when students are unable to get an immediate grasp of sentence structures. This will be a definite handicap in the case of texts with relatives, embedded clauses and complex structures. This can

be minimized by the interactive pedagogy in the classroom by implementing the activity based teaching which promotes confidence and creativity among the students.

Linking of Sentences and Ideas

Another area in which it is essential to prepare the students is in recognizing the various devices used to create textual cohesion and more particularly the use of reference and link-words. Reference covers all the devices that permit lexical relationship within a text. The elements of reference which are important to teach are anaphora, cataphora, comparison, and nominalization. Texts are made up of ideas not only the independent sentences and can be easily decoded with the help of these references. These are the connectors and perform the communicative function in the text.

The above-discussed ideas are theoretical underpinnings of the reading skills whereas how to develop these skills through techniques of skimming, scanning, intensive reading, extensive reading is the challenge for a teacher whether it is an EFL or ESL classroom. For this, the best option is to have activities which target to develop the skills of reading at the same time it is equally important to take into consideration that activities should be interactive and focus to use the group work, pair work and think pair share so that the whole class can participate and get benefited. Some of the sample activities are discussed below which can be easily used to teach reading skills at the undergraduate level or secondary level.

Activity One

Objective of the Activity: To improve the vocabulary of the students using the textbook that is prescribed in the course.

Time: 50 minutes

Level: Secondary level or Undergraduates

Teaching Aids:It is suggested to use the textbook that is prescribed in the course because it is better to use the authentic materials in teaching so that the students can have a real-life exposure.

Procedures:The teacher has to choose the lesson from the textbook which can be used as material to teach reading. It is better to choose according to the size of the group. The activity demands careful scaffolding before it should start. Brainstorming is necessary because students should know what they are going to do in this activity and why they are doing it. The moment they knew it they will be more interested in and actively participate in the activity.

Divide the class into small groups and ask them to read the lesson quickly. Give them 10 minutes and then ask them to stop it. The next step is to call the group in the front and ask them to speak what they have understood from the text, what kind of text it is? And what are the difficult words that you do not understand? The role of the teacher is to be a moderator and elaborate wherever needed. Keep the activity going as it is and in the last when there is a number of difficult vocabulary discussed by the class, the teacher should ask the class to write the word meaning of the words that have been discussed. Doing this activity also promote speaking and writing partially and trains students to become a proficient reader through quick reading. It also develops the group cohesion.

Activity Two

Objective of the Activity:To improve the reading skills of the students as well as enhance the capacity of sentence construction.

Time: 50 minutes

Level: Secondary level or Undergraduates

Teaching Aids:Photocopies of the passage in a separate sheet and it is suggested not to go with long paragraphs.

Procedures:Divide the class into pairs and distribute the sheets among them. The next step is to ask the students to read the sheets loudly. For example pair 1 reads the passage for pair two

and the second pair will note down the difficult word in a separate sheet. Every pair has to repeat the activity ones and submit the sheets to the class teacher. The teacher work is to discuss the difficult words and give an individual word and ask the pairs one by one to make the sentences. The one who fails to make the meaningful sentence, they will not get the bonus points and the word will be forwarded to another pair. Continue the same activity and in the end, the pair who has got the maximum bonus marks will be the winner.

Activity Three

Objective of the Activity: To improve the reading skills by enactment.

Time: 50 minutes

Level: Secondary level or Undergraduates

Teaching Aids: The teacher needs the cards which contain the isolated sentences. Cards will be arranged according to the size of the classroom.

Procedures: The teacher has to distribute the cards among the students and ask them to read the sentences in the cards. The step is to ask the students to come forward in a pair and read the sentences loudly in front of the class. The teacher should ensure that the card's details should not be disclosed to the other students. The next step is to enact the sentences in front of the class. This will be a fun activity and it promotes creativity and enhances the overall competence of the students.

Conclusion

The above-mentioned ideas and activities about reading skill can be extremely effective if it is implemented in a careful environment. For example, the activities demand active participation of the students so the teacher has to take care of the fact that sometimes students get frustrated and demotivated when asked to perform in front of the class. It can be solved through different techniques like group work, pair work and so on. The activities are spontaneous and creative and target to develop the accuracy and fluency of the students. The uniqueness of the activity based teaching is that they focus to improve integrated skills like two

skills at one time. Concluding the above discussion, these activities are creative and effective but only if they are used with proper preparation before going to the actual classroom.

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